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## The Anatomy Lesson

by ARTHUR C. DANTO

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For Art Winslow

Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* cycle consists of five thematically interrelated films, much as Wagner's *Ring* cycle is made up of four distinct but narratively interlinked operas. But Barney has also designed a number of sculptural objects for the work's elaborate *mise en scène*, and it is these that make up the bulk of the exhibition to which the Guggenheim Museum in New York has been given over nearly in its entirety until June 11. Moreover, the museum is internally related to the work, not only because a substantial sequence in one of the films uses its interior space as a setting but because a symbolic correspondence is supposed to exist between the five films and the five ascending curves of the museum's helical architecture. The objects displayed on each of the museum's ramps were in effect props in the corresponding film. Not only do these objects derive their meaning from the films, but the order in which they are experienced, as one ascends from ramp to ramp, reflects the overall narrative of the work.

Wagner designed the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth as the canonical theater for presenting his *oeuvre*, and it is widely appreciated that seeing the *Ring* cycle performed in Bayreuth is a unique and indispensable part of experiencing it. The Guggenheim was of course designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, but Barney has exploited and modified its architecture for the key episode of the work as a whole. So unlike the Festspielhaus, which is not part of the *Ring*'s narrative, the Guggenheim really is part of *Cremaster*'s. This has given Barney's many European enthusiasts a special reason to make a pilgrimage to New York, even if they may already have seen the exhibition in Cologne or Paris, for only here will they have been able to experience the Guggenheim as a work of installation art that belongs to the *Cremaster* endeavor. This makes it, by general consent, far and away the most impressive of the three venues. The question for Barney's admirers, expressed by one of my Northern European correspondents, is whether Matthew Barney is the Picasso of our time, or the Leonardo.

I think it enough that he should be the Matthew Barney of the present age, using artistic resources that would have been unavailable to his predecessors, as well as a conception of visual art that is entirely of our time. *Cremaster* is a contemporary *Gesamtkunstwerk* that uses performance art, music, film, dance, installation, sculpture and photography. Barney himself is the work's author and dramaturge, as well as an actor in possession of the exceptional athletic powers his successive roles demand. And his art embodies preoccupations that are distinctive to our era. In *Cremaster*, these have largely to do with

issues of what one might call the metaphysics of gender, and the use of the term "cremaster" implies as much. The term has existed in English since the seventeenth century, almost exclusively as part of the descriptive anatomy of the male reproductive system: It refers in its primary sense to the muscle of the spermatic cord by which the testes are suspended in the scrotum. But Barney has given it a somewhat allegorical spin, in much the way, I suppose, that Descartes did with the pineal gland, which, because it is situated between the hemispheres of the brain, impressed him as being the seat of the soul. No one to this day quite understands the pineal gland's function, but the cremaster is associated with the descent of the testes into the scrotum in the seventh month after conception, at which point the gender of the fetus is definitively male.

There is a point in embryonic development when matters are less clear-cut. Two genital swellings known as labioscrotal separate, in the female, to become the labia majora, and in the male unite to form the scrotum. But in the labioscrotal phase of our development, we are male and female at once, so to speak, and this condition of gender indeterminacy speaks with particular eloquence to a generation that, especially under the influence of feminist theory, postulates a condition beyond the male-female disjunction. After sexual differentiation is established, the chief function of the cremaster is to raise the testes when the scrotum is chilled.

Why Barney should have singled out this particular muscle, rather than the spermatic cord or, for that matter, the testes themselves, is doubtless connected with the poetics of ascent and descent, which figure as metaphorical actions in the four *Cremaster* films in which Barney himself performs. He does not appear in *Cremaster 1*, in which two Goodyear blimps may be taken as symbolic embodiments of the genital swellings of the labioscrotal moment of our sexual development. In *Cremaster 3*, the character played by Barney climbs up and down an elevator shaft in the Chrysler Building; in *Cremaster 5*, he climbs around the proscenium arch in the Opera House in Budapest; and in *Cremaster 4*, the character burrows through an underground channel fraught with symbolic meaning.

The spiraling interior architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim lends itself to ascent and descent, and becomes a second site for the character's upward itinerary in *Cremaster 3*. Because of its role in the *Cremaster* cycle, the building overcomes the commonplace distinction between exhibiting space and exhibited content. But neither it nor the profusion of objects and images that make up the show as a whole can be grasped as art without reference to the films that are *Cremaster's* core. The Guggenheim accordingly holds daily screenings of its various parts in its Peter Lewis Auditorium, and on each Friday, those with the required stamina can see the work in its entirety. It is a remarkable experience, and a remarkable if not altogether successful work. I have to say that I lost patience with *Cremaster 3*, the last installment of the cycle to have been made, and three grueling hours long. But I am haunted by certain of its sequences, even if I remain unclear what the point is of the ordeal that it, and the cycle as a whole, depict.

The films in the cycle, as a useful handout claims, "represent a condition of pure potentiality," by which I imagine is meant the labioscrotal phase of genital development, before we are definitively male or female. In fact, *Cremaster* I glorifies femininity. It has

two protagonists--a female performer and then a chorus of females who dance, so to speak, as one. The action is dreamlike, and it reminded me, as do many of the *Cremaster* sequences, of the Surrealist films of Maya Deren. The female heroine is situated under a table, laden with grapes, in the cabin of the blimp, seemingly guarded by women of an almost forbidding beauty, wearing smart military uniforms. She succeeds, after some effort, in making an opening in the cloth above her head, through which she pulls down clusters of the perhaps forbidden fruit. The performer's name is Marti Domination, a real personage, I discovered through the Internet, where she is identified as belonging to The House of Domination. And though Marti Domination looks thoroughly feminine, in a white intimate garment, high heels and an extravagant coiffure, the web page leaves the matter of her actual gender somewhat ambiguous. My sense is that Marti Domination portrays a woman, whatever the reality, and that the aura of sexual indeterminacy accounts in part for her having been cast in the role.

The action of *Cremaster 1* is split in two: As Marti Domination arranges the grapes in logographic patterns on the floor, the chorus executes isomorphic Busby Berkeley-like patterns in a football stadium on the ground below: The gridiron is covered in blue AstroTurf. Their movements are cadenced to swelling cascades of deliberately gorgeous music, as in a musical from the 1930s. There is an exalting moment when one of the chorines--Marti Domination herself--runs across the field with two balloons, shaped like the Goodyear blimps. Not much else happens. The action goes back and forth between grapes and girls, cabin and football field, and then comes to an end. The entire review flirts outrageously with kitsch, which gives it, one might say, its authenticity.

If *Cremaster 1* is an ode to a certain idealized femininity--to beauty, music, dancing, fantastic gowns and pumps by Manolo Blahnik--*Cremaster 2* is a stylized ballad to violent masculinity. The hero is Gary Gilmore, portrayed by Barney wearing a full beard. Again, the action is dreamlike. The robbery and murder in the gas station (the Goodyear logo can be glimpsed through its window as the attendant, shot through the back of the head, bleeds to death on the floor) mainly unfurl in silence. The execution of Gilmore, wearing convict stripes, is symbolically enacted as a rodeo act--he dies subduing a bucking bull--and his afterlife is fantasized as a Texas two-step, danced by a cowboy and cowgirl. These images are poetic and powerful, as is the mysterious flashback scene near the end of the film, in which Gilmore's grandmother, as an Edwardian belle with an impossibly narrow waist, speaks in a vast exhibition hall of that era with Harry Houdini. In a brilliant piece of casting, Houdini is played by Norman Mailer, the author, not incidentally, of *The Executioner's Song*. Mailer-Houdini delivers a speech--a rare occurrence in the cycle--poetically describing his escape from the submerged box in which he has been chained. He tells how he becomes one with the lock, how "a real transformation takes place." Escape through transformation is somehow the motif of the entire work, though the nature of our captive condition naturally remains somewhat indeterminate.

*Cremaster 2* is, in my view, the most fully realized of the five segments of the cycle. But I have to say that I found *Cremaster 3* a mess. Calvin Tomkins wrote in *The New Yorker* that "a film like this may be one that only a Dick Cheney could walk out on without a

frisson of self-doubt," but that walking out should have occurred to him at all speaks volumes about the film's shortcomings. Nothing but a cold sense of duty was able to keep me in my seat. The film exemplifies the flaw of hubris it is intended to portray, but one cannot really believe that it is any the less a flaw if it was made intentionally boring and preposterous. It is not my responsibility to moralize, but my conjecture is that Barney has attained the kind of artistic eminence that makes those who work with him reluctant to be critical. If this should be true, then it is a good thing that *Cremaster 4* and *5* were made before hubris on this scale kicked in. *Cremaster 3* is not redeemed by its unquestioned high points, any more than *4* and *5* are seriously compromised by their ennui. It is a piece of bad art by a good and unquestionably important artist.

Disregarding *Cremaster 3*'s mythological prelude, the action of what one might consider its first act is split, somewhat like that of *Cremaster 1*, between two planes. On the upper plane--the suspended elevator cabin, the Cloud Club bar and indeed the glorious roof of the Chrysler Building--the performance is enacted by a single character, identified as the Entered Apprentice, played by Barney himself. On the lower plane--the Chrysler Building's elevator lobby--the performance is by a chorus of five 1967 Chrysler Crown Imperials, engaged in demolishing what I surmise is a vintage black Chrysler. The demolition derby goes on interminably as, with screeching tires, the five Imperials crash into their victim, go into reverse, and crash again, and again, and again, finally dragging or pushing the shattered heap from their midst. The prolonged mayhem alternates with the action on the higher plane, where the Entered Apprentice muddles through the process of mixing mortar, using the elegant Art Deco interior of one of the Chrysler Building's elevators as a vessel.

There is something wanton and willful about the way in which both enactments take place. I somehow feel that Barney, who seems to lack a real sense of humor, intended all this as some kind of comedy. As the Entered Apprentice, he is dressed in vintage 1930s working clothes, including a fedora, and wearing a small mustache. Perhaps he is supposed to be suggesting the ineptitude of the Chaplin character in *Modern Times*. The slapstick routine with the bartender in the Cloud Club, who improvises a stepstool to fetch a glass, only to bring a whole cupboard of glassware crashing on top of him as he falls to the floor, is roughly as funny as the automobile massacre in the lobby below. The entire sequence is malevolently inane.

The Guggenheim Museum is introduced as a symbolic setting in *Cremaster 3*, where the Entered Apprentice makes his graded way upward through a sequence of degrees based on the rites of the Masonic Order. There is a genuine piece of wit in associating the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum with the legendary Temple of Solomon, which is an important mythic site on which Masonic rites and beliefs are based. My grandfather and father were dedicated Masons, so Masonic appurtenances--the compass and square, the trowel and the apron, not to mention references to initiations and sworn secrecies--inflected the atmosphere of my childhood. Masonry really was their religion, but I could never bring myself to follow them, since even as a youth my temperament was too positivistic to believe in occult teaching of any sort. I nevertheless picked up a certain amount of Masonic lore, which helped somewhat to clarify what takes place at successive

stages of the Guggenheim's involuted ramp, as imaginatively transformed by Barney.

"Entered Apprentice" is a term in Masonic nomenclature, referring to the lowest degree in the Order. The highest standard degree is that of Master Mason. Masonic myth traces the origins of the fra-ternity to the Phoenician masons who worked on Solomon's Temple, as the Hebrews lacked the knowledge necessary to realize the king's architectural vision. The Master Mason was named Hiram Abiff, who possessed not merely the practical knowledge of shaping matter into usable forms but the greatest Masonic secret of all, the "ineffable name" of God. I know by hearsay of a ritual enactment in which various Hebrew ruffians try to wrest the knowledge, and hence the power, from Hiram Abiff, who was finally killed--or sacrificed--only to be resurrected by King Solomon himself, using the Masonic Grip.

Barney has cast the sculptor Richard Serra to play the part of the Master Mason, or Architect, whom the Entered Apprentice finally murders. The main action of the Guggenheim interlude, however, requires the Entering Apprentice to pass a series of tests, which must be done in the time it takes for melted Vaseline to spiral its way to the museum's lobby. The molten Vaseline is flung against the para-pet by the Architect, which reenacts one of Serra's most famous sculptures, and indeed one of the signature works of the late 1960s. In 1969, Serra flung molten lead into the angle where wall and floor met in Leo Castelli's warehouse, using the architecture as a kind of ready-made mold. In a photograph of the time, Serra looks like a warrior hero, using the ladle as a weapon, and there is little question but that his act was perceived at the time as inaugurating a new moment in the history of sculpture. It is difficult not to see the demotion of lead to Vaseline as an emblematic degradation of that heroic moment to the present moment of postmodern art. The fact that the Entered Apprentice is himself killed in *Cremaster 3* is nevertheless a declaration that an artist of our day will achieve the status attained by Serra: Every member of the Masonic Order impersonates Hiram Abiff when initiated as a Master Mason. I have, meanwhile, nothing to say about the significance that Vaseline evidently has in Matthew Barney's vocabulary of symbols. Its cultural meaning is that of a lubricant, which can perhaps be connected to the two phallic columns erected by Hiram Abiff in the courtyard of the Temple. Someone once told me that in the night table next to his bed, all that was found after Auden's death was a large, economy-size jar of Vaseline and two pairs of castanets.

I must leave readers to their own resources in dealing with *Cremaster 4* and *5*. I think they are both quite magical. Barney is at his best in the role of The Candidate--a dandified tap-dancer, half man and half sheep, with red spit curls--in *Cremaster 4*, which takes place on the Isle of Man. The "Three Faeries"--personages of genuine sexual ambiguity who serve as benign intercessors--are among Barney's most compelling inventions. In both these films, I thought of *The Magic Flute*--especially so in *Cremaster 5*, in which Ursula Andress plays the role of "the Queen of Chain," in the sequence that takes place in the Hungarian State Opera House in Budapest. As everyone knows, the narrative of Mozart's masterpiece is also based on Masonic ritual. One cannot, meanwhile, praise too highly the musical scores for the whole cycle, composed by Jonathan Bepler.

Since objects and images relating to the different parts of the *Cremaster* cycle are arrayed on successive stages of the Guggenheim, the intention is that we shall imagine a mapping through which the exhibition replicates the cycle in another modality--in space, so to speak, in contrast with time. But the experience is totally different, and unless one has internalized the films and something of the ideas that animate them, what one encounters as one ascends or descends the ramp is more or less just art-stuff. It does not on its own make an enchanting show. But the cycle has moments of great enchantment. It is an uncertain achievement, but one with which everyone interested in contemporary art must deal.

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### Arthur Danto

*Excerpts from chapter 2 of Arthur Danto's The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art, "The Intractable Avant-Garde"*

#### *From Taste to Disgust*

The narrative of aesthetic redemption assures us that sooner or later we will see all art as beautiful, however ugly it appeared at first. *Try to see this as beautiful!* becomes a sort of imperative for those who look at art that does not initially appear beautiful at all. Someone told me that she found beauty in the maggots infesting the severed and seemingly putrescent head of a cow, set in a glass display case by the young British artist Damien Hirst. It gives me a certain wicked pleasure to imagine Hirst's frustration if hers were the received view. He intended that it be found disgusting, which was the one aesthetically unredeemable quality acknowledged by Kant in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*. Disgust was noticed by him as a mode of ugliness resistant to the kind of pleasure which even the most displeasing things—"the Furies, diseases, the devastations of war"—are capable of causing when represented as beautiful by works of art. "That which excites *disgust* [*Ekel*]," Kant writes, "Cannot be represented in accordance with nature without destroying all aesthetic satisfaction." The representation of a disgusting thing or substance has on us the same effect that the presentation of a disgusting thing or substance would itself have." Since the purpose of art is taken to be the production of pleasure, only the most perverse of artists would undertake to represent the disgusting, which cannot "in accordance with nature," produce pleasure in normal viewers.

I don't know what works of art, if any, Kant could have had in mind as disgusting, and he may have counted the very idea of disgusting art as incoherent: if a piece of mimesis was

of something disgusting, it would itself be disgusting, contravening its status as art, which in its nature is meant to please. I have seen a sculpture from Nuremberg from the late Gothic era, where a figure, known as "The Prince of the World," which looks comely and strong from the front, is displayed in a state of wormy decay when seen from behind: the body is shown the way it would look decomposing in the grave. Such sights explain why we actually bury the dead. It is intended thus to be seen as revolting by normal viewers, and there can be no question of what is the intended function of showing bodily decay with the skill of a Nuremberg stone carver. It is not to give the viewer pleasure. It is, rather, to disgust the viewer, and in so doing, to act as a *vanitas*, reminding us through presentation that the flesh is corrupt, and its pleasures a distraction from our higher aspirations, namely to achieve everlasting blessedness and avoid eternal punishment. To show the human body as disgusting is certainly to violate good taste, but Christian artists were prepared to pay this price for what Christianity regards as our highest moral purpose. One has, I suppose, a choice between denying that it is art since it contravenes taste, as I surmise that Kant would have done; or to dismiss taste as he and his contemporaries understood it as too narrow a criterion for defining art. (49–52)

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### *Abject Art*

"Nothing is so much set against the beautiful as disgust," Kant wrote in his 1764 essay, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*. The sublime is too large a topic to address at this point in my inquiry, but it is worth noting that in the pre-critical text, Kant deliciously observes that the antonym of the sublime is the *silly*, which suggests that the effect of Dada was less the abuse of beauty than the rejection of the sublime. But just possibly the disgusting, as logically connected to beauty through opposition can also have the connection with morality that beauty does. In the early 1990s, curators recognized a genre of contemporary art they designated "Abject Art," which may be what Jean Clair has primarily in mind. "The abject," writes the art historian Joseph Koerner, "is a novelty neither in the history of art nor in the attempts to write that history." Koerner cites, among other sources, a characteristically profound insight of Hegel: "The novelty of Christian and Romantic art consisted of taking the abject as its privileged object. Specifically, the tortured and crucified Christ, that ugliest of creatures in whom divine beauty became, through human evil, basest abjection." Rudolph Wittkower begins his great text on art and architecture in Italy after the Council of Trent by recording the decision of that council to display the wounds and agonies of the

martyred, in order, through this display of affect, to elicit the sympathy of viewers and through that to strengthen threatened faith. "Even Christ must be shown 'afflicted, bleeding, spat upon, with his skin torn, wounded, deformed, pale and unsightly' if the subject calls for it." Hegel cites the art historian, Count von Rumohr on an earlier Byzantine tradition:

Accustomed to the sight of gruesome physical punishments, [they] pictured the Saviour on the Cross hanging down with the whole weight of his body, the lower part swollen, knees slackened and bent to the left, the bowed head struggling with the agony of a gruesome death. Thus what they had in view as their subject was physical suffering as such. [By contrast] the Italians were accustomed to give a comforting appearance to the face of the Saviour on the Cross, and so, as it seems, followed the idea of the victory of the spirit and not, as the Byzantines did, the succumbing of the body.

The tendency in the Renaissance to beautify the crucified Christ was in effect a move to classicize Christianity by returning the tortured body to a kind of athletic grace, denying the basic message of Christian teaching that salvation is attained through abject suffering. The aestheticism of the eighteenth century was a corollary of the rationalism of natural religion. It was Kant's stunning achievement to situate aesthetics in the critical architectonic as a form of judgment two small steps away from pure reason. Romanticism, as in the philosophy of Hegel, was a re-affirmation of the Baroque values of the Counter-Reformation. The problem with art, as Hegel saw it, lay in its ineradicable dependence upon sensuous presentation. As with the blood, the torn flesh, the shattered bones, the flayed skin, the broken bodies, the reduction of consciousness to pain and agony in Baroque representation. What Abject art has done is to seize upon the emblems of degradation as a way of crying out in the name of humanity. "For many in contemporary culture," the critic Hal Foster writes, "truth resides in the traumatic or abject subject, in the diseased or damaged body. Thus body is the evidentiary basis of important witnessings to truth, of necessary witnessings against power." (56–7)

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What the disgusting and the abject—and for that matter the silly—help us understand is what a heavy shadow the concept of beauty cast over the philosophy of art. And because beauty became, in the eighteenth century especially, so bound up with the concept of taste, it obscured how wide and diverse the range of aesthetic qualities is. Disgust, for example, provokes the viewer to feel revolted by what the work of art that possesses it is about. It does so in just the same way that eroticism arouses the viewer to be sexually



attracted to the subject of the work. These observations are slightly simple-minded, of course. It may take considerable interpretation to see what the fact that it is disgusting *means* in a work of art. The purposes of eroticism in a work or art may be to get the viewer to think about his or her inhibited personality or emotionally impoverished life.

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**"Arthur Danto" Posted by Dan at 01:21 AM**